

Turning to Dubenko, the People's Commissar

went on:

"And you go straight to a hotel. Take five days' rest, and then we can talk."

A telephone rang. The secretary hurried in, exclaiming:

"Comrade People's Commissar, the Kremlin's on the line."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

From out the deserted shops it seemed to creep—the dead hush that blanketed the town. The rhythmic breath of the blowers, the pulse of the works, had ceased. The very air had changed, had lost its faint odour of gas; and even this odour, once detested, was now missed as an indispensable element of life.

The town had come into being together with the works, had grown as the works expanded. New blast furnaces had been built—and new houses had sprung up in the workers' settlement. Recreation rooms and dining rooms had been organized in the shops—and, in the town, there had appeared clubhouses and restaurants. The roads and paths on the works territory had been paved—and asphalt had covered the town's streets

and squares. Gay flower beds had been laid out on the works grounds, where weeds and junk had once flourished—and new parks and boulevards had grown up in the town.

The town had lived by the works and for the works. The town had been the rearguard; the works—the front line, where the battle for steel raged furiously day after day, shift after shift. Every eight hours one army, after brief but strenuous combat, had been relieved by another army, rested and refreshed; and the achievements and failures of these armies had moved the town as the victories and reverses of an army at the front move the nation at home. The workers and engineers most highly esteemed in the town had been the town's most honoured citizens. Their portraits had adorned the streets on gala days, beside the portraits of the country's leaders.

A typical Donbas town, its existence without the works was meaningless, impossible. The town was dead—and the town lay still and lifeless.

The nights had become darker, the days more cloudy. It was as though the streets had been flooded with slag. Every step was fraught with danger, as on a cooled slag crust, that may lapse underfoot at any moment.

It was very quiet. Even the dogs had slunk into their kennels, and gave no sign of life but

...tive whine now and again, as though they
... an approaching wolf pack. Sometimes a
... rang out, or a short burst from an au-
... rifle. The echo would carry far in the
... stillness, and the hearts of the towns-
... would contract in pain and sorrow.
The days were fearful, the nights more fear-
still.

On one such murky night, a slender young girl
... her way noiselessly along a street on the
... kirts of the town, keeping close in the shadow
... nces and walls, and pausing frequently to
... Reaching a house with a low wooden
... she glanced around her, and then tapped
... The door opened, barely wide enough to
... her, and she slipped inside.

... a small, low-ceilinged room, faintly lit by
... ad wick thrust into a bottle of oil, lay an
... woman with bloated features. Looking up at
... d anxiously from under heavy, swollen eye-
... he asked:

... that you, Maria dear? Weren't you afraid,
... time of night? Has anything happened?"
... lo, nothing special. I just wanted to have
... with Valya," said Maria Grevtsova sooth-
... and, changing the subject abruptly, she
asked: "Who's taking care of your house for
you, now you've left home?"

"Darya Vasilyevna's staying there. Only I'm so frightened Valsky might give her away. He can't forgive her that nickname she gave him—'beast number five.'"

When Valya had bolted the outer door, she led her friend into another room.

"Valya!" Maria whispered. "Do you know Krainev has stayed in town? He's betraying people to the Germans, and shooting them down himself, like dogs!"

Valya started back.

"It's a lie! It can't be!" she cried. But her voice quivered and broke.

Then Maria told her how, on the very first day of the German occupation—and from that day the town had begun a new and fearsome reckoning of time—Krainev had appeared in the works settlement, accompanied by German soldiers, and started butchering the engineers who had remained in town.

Valya dropped limply into a chair.

Heartsick with watching her mother's rapid decline, she felt that she could not bear the pain of this new blow.

Maria continued, looking intently into Valya's eyes:

"I came specially to warn you to keep out of his sight, or he'll make away with you too. He

works it very skilfully, they say. The way he killed Lobachov!"

"Lobachov? Why Lobachov, in particular?"

Maria shrugged impatiently.

"Why, why, why! Go ask him, if you feel like swinging on a post by the market place. There were five hung there today."

Valya was too crushed to speak.

Krainev! How clearly she recalled his voice, pressing her to leave. And the nights in the shop, when German planes were overhead....

"Valya," Maria whispered, "you can help us out. Write him a note—ask him to come and see you. He'll be met, and...."

"Why must I write?"

"Didn't you tell me yourself, how he urged you to leave? Write that you need his help."

"No," said Valya dully, shaking her head determinedly.

"No?" Maria cried.

Valya was silent for some time. At length, pressing her head desperately between her hands, she murmured:

"I've got to make sure what it all means."

"What's there to make sure about, Valya?"

Maria asked, laying an arm tenderly over her shoulders. "It's all perfectly clear. Horribly clear. I can understand how you feel. You trusted him.

He won your heart, somehow. But you must overcome all that. Go to the table and write a note."

"No," Valya repeated, "I won't. I can't."

"You won't?" returned Maria indignantly. "In other words, you're willing to sit back and see us all strung up on lampposts?"

There was a silence. Then, with an effort, Valya whispered:

"I can't."

"Is that your last word to me?"

"Yes."

"And you call yourself an underground worker! Well, take care, Valya. Take care!"

Maria's voice had a warning, almost a threatening note. Turning sharply, she left the room.

"Maria," the old woman called from her bed. "Maria! Don't go out so late! Spend the night here with us."

But there was no reply. The bolt rattled briefly, and the outer door was opened and shut.

Valya sat motionless, her head bowed low.

The smoky wick on the table flickered and went out. Valya's mother was no longer moaning. Had she heard anything? Had she understood?

Faintly, the old woman called:

"Valyusha."

Valya went over to the bed, and sat down beside her mother.

"You must write that note, Valya," the old woman told her slowly. "Just think how many of our people he can betray! Bid your heart be still, and write. Perhaps he didn't really mean to stay behind, but once things have turned out so, he's trying to save his skin."

"Can it really be so?" Valya thought, with sinking heart. Aloud, she said, shaping the words with difficulty:

"I'll... see, mother."

She knew her mother's kind and trusting heart. And from that heart had come such grim and merciless judgment!

Moving away from the bed, Valya threw a shawl over her shoulders. She was shivering.

"Valyushka," the mother called again; and when the girl bent over her, she whispered faintly:

"Valyusha, you mustn't be lost on account of me. Spare me that sin. Go away from this town. You can't save me. I'm dying anyway. And Darya Vasilyevna will see me buried somehow. But your life is all ahead. The Germans will be driven out, I know. But—until then? Here in town, someone will surely give you away. Valsky, or maybe Krainev. If you go somewhere else, who can ever tell what and who you are?"

Gently, Valya smoothed the pillow. Choking down her tears, for her mother's sake, she slipped away into the other room. Her mother's days were numbered, as she could not help but see. Soon she would remain alone, entirely alone; for now, of course, her comrades would have nothing to do with her. How to win back their confidence, to prove her honesty? Comply with Maria's demand? No, that she would not do. Krainev could not have turned traitor. Valya knew he could not.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

When Krainev got home, that final night, he dropped onto a couch and for a long time lay motionless, utterly exhausted.

Gradually, however, his limp muscles began to recover their resiliency. And with returning strength came realization of the horror of all that had occurred: the power station undestroyed, and he himself left under German rule.

Krainev got up, rummaged in his pockets for matches, lit the oil lamp, and looked about him. Everything was just as he had left it: the bookcase, filled with volumes selected and accumulated in the course of many years; the desk, with some unfinished work lying open on it. A wrapper

of Irina's hung on the back of a chair. The thought of her flashed in his mind, and vanished.

His own study—but how alien now, what an appalling place for him to be in! His whole life here, the result of years of work and study, crushed in one instant.

His eye was caught by a large photograph of Vadim, an excellent piece of work. The child looked out of the frame at him with loving trust. His heart contracting painfully, he thought:

"I'll never see him again, never! And he—what will he, my son, know of his father? That I failed to carry out orders, and remained with the Germans!"

After a pause, he said aloud:

"Son of a traitor to our Motherland."

And, his hair bristling at the very sound of the words, he repeated:

"A traitor to our Motherland."

He recalled Dubenko, Makarov, Gayevoi. They had trusted him. And now? What must they think of him? What could they think of him?

The steppe rose before him, and his comrades, hastening Eastwards across it. They were on Soviet ground, among their own people. And he?

"What am I to do now?" he asked himself; and no answer came. He was gripped by the desire to disappear, to vanish from the face of the earth.

"If I had a revolver," he muttered desperately. Suddenly, through the night, came music, loud and gay.

What could it be? Where from?

Krainev went out into the hall, and then onto the staircase landing. The music came from Lobachov's apartment. Through the strained hush that hung over the building, loud voices sounded, followed by deep, familiar laughter—Pivovarov's.

"If I had a revolver!" Krainev whispered, trembling with fury; and this time the words had a new and different meaning.

For some time he stood on the landing, listening, uncertain how to proceed. A rumbling in the street outside interrupted his thoughts.

Returning to his study, Sergei Petrovich put out the lamp and cautiously raised a corner of the blind.

Tanks were rolling down the middle of the street. Mechanically, he began to count them. Behind the tanks came truckloads of mobile infantry.

Such a target, if only he had a grenade!

Suddenly a soldier in one of the trucks threw up his automatic and directed a long burst against the ground-floor windows. There was a crash of shattered panes. A woman screamed.

"It's begun," said Krainev, drawing away from the window.

Vividly realizing the tragedy of his situation, he puzzled once more over the question: what to do? Wait through the coming day, and at nightfall try to slip out of town? But where to? Perhaps across the front?

Sergei Petrovich pictured to himself his meeting with his comrades from the works. They would crowd around him, shower him with questions. And what could he tell them? That he had let himself be fooled like a baby; that he had left the power station to the enemy, undestroyed? They would understand, of course, and believe; but that would not make it any easier. They had fulfilled their duty, and he had failed. He had shown himself the worst engineer at the works.

No, the worst in the whole Donbas.

In the plants of the Dnieper zone, he knew, everything of value had been either evacuated or destroyed; and the Zaporozhstal workers, dismantling and loading under artillery fire, had evacuated even the structural steel frames of their shop buildings.

Wait for nightfall? And could he be sure of living through the day? Pivovarov and Lobachov would unquestionably betray him.

"How did it happen?" he asked himself again and again.

Pacing up and down the room, he reviewed in memory every detail of the scene at the power station. Suddenly, he lit the lamp, and, taking the director's note from his pocket, held it up close to the light. The signature was genuine, beyond all doubt; but the text was forged. It had been written over the erased content of some old order signed by Dubenko.

Now it was clear. Pivovarov had twice snipped off the burning ends of the cords. He had had those scissors ready in his pocket, so as not to lose an instant. And in the end, after deceiving Krainev, he had pulled out the fuses and set the ammonite on fire.

At the thought of this calculated treachery, Sergei Petrovich gritted his teeth in helpless rage.

Again he paced up and down the room, lighting cigarette after cigarette. He could think of no practical solution.

And then a thought entered his mind: a solution so simple, so daring, so striking, that he screwed up his eyes, as though he had turned them on a stream of fiery, molten steel.

Early in the morning, Krainev slipped out of the house and turned up the street towards the

central part of the town. He was the first Soviet citizen to appear out of doors that day. German patrols stopped him several times, but let him pass on when he showed them a packet addressed to the Herr Kommandant.

Crossing the square, now crowded with tanks, Sergei Petrovich paused before the entrance to the town Soviet.

The long row of touring cars and motorcycles parked in front of the building confirmed his supposition that the Kommandantur would be quartered here.

*"Ich will sehen Herr Kommandant,"** he said to the two soldiers with automatics who barred his way.

The soldiers tried to question him. Making no reply to their enquiries, he repeated persistently, over and over, that he must see the Kommandant, must see him immediately.

A dandified young German officer, coming out of the building during this dispute, paused on the top step to listen. Then, quickly taking in the situation, he came down the steps and said a few words to the soldiers. Reluctantly, they stepped back. The officer, in turn, attempted to question Krainev; but he received no

* "I want to see the commandant."

other reply than the two words, persistently repeated:

*"Sehr nötig!"**

In the end, however, Sergei Petrovich was compelled to hand over his packet. After a cursory glance at its contents, the officer ordered the soldiers to search the Russian. In one of his pockets, they found the fuses Brovin had given him the night before. These the officer took warily, between finger and thumb. Signing to Krainev to follow, he went inside.

Try as he might to keep his nerves under control, Krainev could maintain only a surface appearance of composure. His heart began to race as they entered the waiting room, where he was told to wait while his guide went into the inner office. The sense of reality was deserting him. He felt himself an observer, rather than a participant, of events.

Before he could pull himself together, the inner door opened, and the officer who had brought him invited him to enter.

The elderly German seated at the desk looked at Krainev silently, with tired eyes, for a moment or two. Krainev looked back at him in some surprise. There was nothing warlike about the

* "Very urgent!"

Kommandant's dull, commonplace features, nothing militant about his shapeless figure—nothing of the fascist beast Krainev had pictured. He looked a peaceful civilian, masquerading in uniform.

At length, breaking the silence, the German asked:

*"Was wünschen Sie?"**

*"Ich weiss die Adressen Aktiwisten und Kommunisten, und ich will sie schiessen,"*** Krainev replied—the last of the answers he had memorized at home. Thus far, they had stood him in good stead.

The German's face expressed the most lively interest. He put some new question; but this time Krainev only shook his head helplessly. Then the Kommandant spoke in broken Russian:

"You can tell to me Russisch. Who you are?"

Krainev gave his name and position, adding that he had been ordered to blow up the power station, but had prevented its destruction and now turned it over to the German command. To illustrate his words, he pointed to the fuses taken from his pocket, which were now lying on the

* "What do you want?"

** "I know the addresses of active Soviet supporters and Communists, and I want to shoot them."

Kommandant's desk. Glancing at them doubtfully, the German demanded:

"How you can proof?"

"I've come to you. That's proof sufficient," Krainev returned, with an air of injured dignity.

Hurrying on, he explained to the Kommandant that he knew the addresses of active Soviet supporters and Communists who had remained in the town to carry on partisan fighting and wrecking activities; that he wished to destroy them, today, immediately, before they had time to do any damage.

"*Nein, nein!*"* exclaimed the German, shaking his head. "Not to destroy, to catch. Catch the end from the string, un-to-tangle the knot."

Sergei Petrovich frowned. The detention of Lobachov and Pivovarov would be altogether at variance with his plans.

"To catch—that is gut," the German continued rapidly. "We make to them a little bit massage, then they tell us much things. How many?"

"Two."

"How much marks per head?"

Krainev shuddered.

"Nothing. I want revenge," he declared, and his voice rang with unfeigned hate.

* "No, no!"

The Kommandant seemed surprised, but went on approvingly:

"What you need for to catch this partisans?"

"Two soldiers with automatics, and a revolver."

"*Nichts mehr?** That iss all?"

"Yes, that's all."

The Kommandant stared uncomprehendingly. But then, with a crafty smile, he said:

"You will catch by one und unexpected?"

"Yes. Separately, and by surprise."

"Hm. You understand gut the German school from war: by one und unexpected."

The Kommandant said a few words to the officer, who had been listening attentively. Then, turning back to Krainev, he told him:

"You can already ride."

"A revolver," repeated Krainev.

"You will not need. Offizier und soldat will be to help you."

"I'm not going without a revolver," Krainev insisted. "Why should I risk my life?"

The two Germans consulted together.

"Gut, then," said the Kommandant. "There you will be given."

In another few minutes, Sergei Petrovich found

* "Nothing more?"

himself in a car, with the officer and three soldiers, racing towards the settlement.

It was a warm, sunny day. The town lay hushed and still. Fallen leaves rustled softly under the wheels of the car.

"Does the officer know Russian?" Krainev wondered. And, remembering the attention with which the German had followed the talk in the Kommandant's office, he decided: "He probably does, a little. In any case, I must shoot fast, before Lobachov gets a chance to say a word. Besides, that scoundrel probably knows German pretty well. He was abroad for some time."

The settlement seemed entirely deserted. People kept to their houses, behind shuttered windows, afraid to stir into the street.

When they reached his house, Krainev signed to the driver to stop the car. He got out quickly and started up the stairs. The Germans followed close behind.

"My revolver," Krainev whispered to the officer, stopping before the door of Lobachov's apartment.

With evident reluctance, the officer handed him the weapon.

The soldiers were glancing warily, now at the door, now at their guide. The officer undid the flap of his holster.

The door opened slightly, and Lobachov's face appeared, crumpled with sleep. His nearsighted eyes were blinking nervously. At the sight of the Germans, he broke into a welcoming smile, and, removing the chain from its catch, threw the door wide open. Pivovarov, bloated after the night's carousals, stood behind him.

Krainev strode forward. Lobachov's wide smile faded, and his eyebrows flew up in amazement, over eyes round and glassy with fear. He opened his mouth to speak, but his tongue would not obey. Desperately, he tried to shut the door.

Then Krainev fired, straight into his face. Lobachov threw up his arms, as though seeking support, and sank to the floor.

Pivovarov fled down the hall into the rooms. Krainev aimed; but as he was about to fire, the officer jerked him back and seized his revolver. A tall, fat woman ran out of the rooms into the hall, screaming piercingly.

"*Geschwind nachjagen!*"* the officer shouted.

The soldiers ran down the hall, but hesitated at the first door, fearing an ambush.

"He'll get away, the swine," Sergei Petrovich reflected angrily, wondering what was most to be

* "After him!"

feared: Pivovarov's escape, or his capture by the Germans.

Pivovarov had vanished as though into thin air. Search as they might, in the building, the yard, and the adjacent streets, the Germans could not find him.

The officer was beside himself with fury. Showering curses on the soldiers, he seized Krainev by the arm and pulled him back to the car.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Krainev did not see the Kommandant again that day. Soon after the officer had left him in the waiting room, Soviet planes appeared over the town. Antiaircraft guns began to bark, and the Hitlerites scurried out of the building, seeking the shelter of the slit trenches in the back yard.

The Kommandant did not return to his office after the alert. Some official took Krainev's address and told him he could go home.

Coming into his rooms, Krainev felt only one desire: for sleep. He plunged without thought into his chilly bed.

Next morning, the same officer arrived to take him to the Kommandantur.

The swift drive through the crisp autumn air was refreshing; but it could not dispel Krainev's uneasiness. He entered the office with a nervous tremor, entirely uncertain as to what was awaiting him inside.

Colonel Pfaul, the Kommandant, greeted Krainev as an old acquaintance, pointing to a comfortable chair and offering cigarettes.

"No, Pivovarov hasn't been here so far," Krainev decided, relieved.

The colonel made no reference, however, to the events of the day before.

"You are need to me," he said, proceeding at once to business. "The radio station iss begin to work. Today, to six o'clock, you should to tell in the microphone how you are safe the power station und how you are catch the partisan. You should to tell for the population, advice to them, to help us so as you are help."

"But I'm a very poor speaker," Sergei Petrovich replied, realizing as he spoke that no such excuse could help him.

Mistrust flickered in the colonel's eyes.

"Cicero you are not, fery well I know," he said coldly. "Und the führer you are not. In the world iss not more such an orator. But to tell Russisch you can. I do not asking you to tell Deutsch. That will later be. The conquered must

to know the tongue from his conqueror. We Germans cannot to know the tongues from all the conquered. We must then to know all the tongues from the whole world. I do not understanding why you want not to speak."

There was a pause. At length, Krainev said:
"Very well. I will."

"To five o'clock will come a car und bring you in the radio station," the colonel told him, well pleased. He rose behind his desk, intimating that the audience was over.

Sergei Petrovich left the building with his brains in a whirl, entirely at a loss what to do. Here was confirmation of the thought that had occurred to him, with icy horror, the day before, as he drove through the town with the Germans: that the course of action he had chosen might lead him too far. None but himself could realize the true significance of his conduct; and he might very well be destroyed by the Soviet underground before he could achieve the aim he had set himself—to blow up the power station.

What to do? Flee? But how, and where to, in broad daylight?

And what if Pivovarov, for all his cowardice, had summoned up the courage to come out of hiding and tell his story to the Kommandant?

Perhaps even now, as Krainev walked down

the street, sharp eyes were watching his every movement?

Instinctively, he quickened his step.

If he refused to speak.... But that would amount to a confession of his true attitude towards the Germans. Yes, the one refuge was flight. Only—how, and where to?

This brought him back to where he had started from. There seemed to be no way out.

He had reached the settlement. Glancing towards the works, he noticed a slight quivering in the air over one of the stacks of the power station. Evidently, the Germans were trying to fire the boilers.

"So they've found people who are willing to work for them, from the very first day," Krainev reflected. "I wonder who?"

He tried to imagine the sound of his voice over the radio, appealing for collaboration with the Hitlerites. The thought was impossible. Again he turned to glance at the power station. A faint wisp of smoke appeared over the stack, and melted away in the clear air. Then another wisp appeared. This time it did not melt away, but hung steadily in place. Soon it was not a wisp, but a heavy cloud.

Krainev's thoughts turned to the charge of ammonite walled up in the cable channel.

How to get access to it, and blow it up? None but he, probably, knew of its existence. Walled up as it was, the Germans were not likely to discover it. But how to gain access? How to blow it up?

Mechanically, he walked on.

At home, the hours dragged by in painful indecision. Wandering from room to room, stumbling blindly against the furniture, Sergei Petrovich sought solution. Perhaps he should speak, as the Germans demanded, in order to gain their confidence? But he knew that, with the microphone before him, he could say only what he really felt. Clearly, he would be destroyed after his first few words, calling to struggle against fascism. And the power station would remain. No, he must cling to life, somehow, anyhow, until his task had been accomplished, until the power station lay in ruins.

The loudspeaker beside his bed suddenly broke into hoarse speech. The latest German communiqué was being broadcast in Russian from the town station.

At first Krainev listened attentively, weighing every word in his mind, attempting to distinguish truth from fiction. Then, with an impatient shrug, he turned back to his interrupted thoughts.

Yes, he was on the other side of the line.

Over there, beyond this line, that was called the front, his comrades were fighting and working, defending the Motherland. The eager wish to be with them swelled his heart almost to bursting; but he knew now that he would not go to them until he had carried out his task.

His own name struck his ear, coming wheezily from the loudspeaker. Another name followed—that of Smakovsky.

"I'll be damned if you get a single word from me." Krainev muttered, as though in reply.

An idea occurred. He frowned and shook his head. But it persisted. He could think of nothing better.

Half an hour before the time appointed, Sergei Petrovich set on the table a bottle of cognac, and two of port. They had been standing about in the sideboard since some time before the war. Looking down at them, he twisted his lips in a wry smile.

He drank a glass of cognac, and followed it with port. Then he repeated the dose, and repeated it again.

To his horror, he felt that the drink was not affecting him.

Gradually, however, the cognac did its work.

A little before six, a German car stopped in front of the house, and the driver went in. He

knocked for a long time at Krainev's door, but there was no response. Finally, he turned the knob. The door opened. Peering warily around him, he entered the apartment.

Krainev was fast asleep on the couch. The German tried to wake him, but he only muttered something unintelligible and slept on.

Bending over the couch, the German soon realized that Krainev was dead drunk. He looked at the clock, and cursed. Then, with a wistful glance at the empty bottles, he turned on his heel and left.

CHAPTER TWENTY

By eight o'clock, Serdyuk had lost all patience. Tired with his endless pacing up and down the room, he threw himself onto his bed. The Prasolovs should have been back long since.

Now and again, some sound in the night made him sit up, listening tensely, imagining that the gate had creaked, or that guarded footsteps sounded on the porch. Thus had it been in the days of his border service, when he sat anxiously awaiting the return of the night patrols. Time should have inured him; but it never had. He thought it easier by far to freeze in the forest the whole night through than to wait in his warm

room at the border post for his comrades to return. And at the border, after all, it had been easier; for the comrades who went out into the forest by night had been men of experience, men who had passed through the mill. Whereas now. . . .

Someone tapped lightly at the window that opened on the yard. At last! Serdyuk sprang up and hurried to the door. It was Pyotr Prasolov.

"Well? Talk up!"

"Krainev didn't speak," said Pyotr, and stopped to catch his breath. "I didn't see him. But I heard a shot outside Smakovsky's house, and then there was automatic fire, and some motorcycles rushed past. Then everything quieted down. They might have caught Pavel. What do you think?"

Serdyuk made no comment. After a vain attempt to draw him into discussion of what could be detaining Pavel, Pyotr settled down on a chair in the corner, facing the window, and sat motionless—waiting. Short, sturdily built, his head well set on a short, thick neck, he had the appearance of perfect calm. Not a muscle in his broad face moved, even when footsteps sounded in the street. Only his eyes would gleam more brightly for an instant.

"Where did he get his self-control?" Serdyuk wondered, recalling the brothers' onetime escapades. "In the Comsomol? But Pavel was with him in the Comsomol, yet he's still impetuous and unrestrained as ever."

At length Serdyuk glanced at the clock, dropped his long-dead cigarette into an ash-tray, and got up, saying:

"You go home. It's late. Only keep to back ways, and be careful."

Reluctantly, Pyotr moved towards the door. At the threshold, however, he stopped and said:

"Andrei Vasilyevich, my brother will come here before he goes home. He might come late at night. Let me stay."

Serdyuk had expected this. Nor did he himself want Pyotr to leave. It was not easy to be alone, on such a night. Still, after an instant's hesitation, he replied:

"No, it's no good. Go home. Who ever heard of two members of the underground spending the night in the same house, if it could possibly be helped? If they come to get one of us, they'll catch two instead! Go, and be quick."

"I won't go any further than the yard, anyway," Pyotr returned stubbornly. "I'll spend the night under the porch steps, if I have to, but I won't leave before my brother comes."

"Even if I order you to go?" asked Serdyuk, frowning.

"Even if you order me to go."

Unexpectedly, Serdyuk yielded.

"Oh, well, stay if you want to," he said, lying down again on his bed; and Pyotr was amazed by the dull indifference of his tone. "Only sit still, and don't go tramping round the house. My aunt doesn't like it. And besides, the floors have just been washed."

To himself, Serdyuk was thinking angrily:

"Raw cubs! One of them seems to have got into a fine mess—and with orders not to shoot unless the risk was negligible! And the other won't go home. Well, let him stay. When Pavel gets back, I'll give them both a talking-to.... Only—what if he doesn't get back?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he glanced across the room. Pyotr was sitting at the very edge of his chair, in the pose of one prepared to dash into action at an instant's notice.

"You might as well lie down," Serdyuk called, moving over to the wall. "We'll have a long wait. He won't come before morning, now."

Pyotr shook his head and remained where he was.

As the clock on the wall struck eleven, they heard a cautious tapping at the window. Prasolov

hurried out to the door. Serdyuk thrust his hand under the pillow, where his revolver lay.

There was a sound of whispering in the entry.

Pyotr reappeared, followed by Maria Grevtsova.

Nodding glumly in response to her greeting, Serdyuk demanded:

"Where are you planning to spend the night, Maria?"

"At home, of course," she replied. "Where else?"

"Then why do you come here so late?"

"I have important news."

"Just the same, you've no right to run such risks."

Grevtsova only shrugged indifferently.

Pyotr thought Serdyuk would be angry; but he only motioned Maria to a chair.

The girl looked slowly around the room: at the big, old-fashioned sideboard, filling all the space between two windows; the wide double bed, of polished walnut; the table, on thick, carved legs; the tiny lamp burning before the icons in the corner.

"It's a nice, comfortable room," she said. "Only you'll have to give it up."

Serdyuk glanced at her silently.

"Has Teplova ever been here?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Then you must move. She's refused to write the note."

"She may be right, at that," Serdyuk said thoughtfully. "I decided not to wait until she wrote, once this chance came up to finish him after he spoke over the radio. But he didn't speak. It's a queer business, and I don't entirely understand it. We'll have to keep our hands off him for a while."

"Keep our hands off?" Maria cried. "Why?"

But Serdyuk did not answer. He was not to be drawn out so easily. He was waiting for Pavel, and did not want to talk of anything else. Moreover, he was angry, thinking with growing irritation over the evening's developments. Three of them in one house. And if there should be a raid? Comparatively, he was safer than the others. He was provided with a passport, a document to the effect that he had recently served a prison term, and a certificate of rejection for military service in view of bad health. If no chance circumstance exposed him, all would be well. But the others? How explain their presence in his room?

A shot sounded in the street, setting the window panes rattling. Prasolov sprang to the door; but Serdyuk barred his way.

"Let me out, Andrei Vasilyevich," Prasolov whispered fiercely, trying to push past him. "Maybe it's Pavel they're after."

"And if it's Pavel, you want them to Pyotr as well. Is that it?" returned Serdyuk thrusting him back implacably. "What good do you do out there?"

Only after half an hour had passed did Serdyuk allow the young man to go out. Pyotr paused by the gate, looking warily up and down the street. At first he saw nothing. Gradually, however, his eyes adjusted themselves to the darkness; and soon he distinguished a dark motion on the pavement, out in the middle of the street. An instant later, he was kneeling beside it. It was a man, flat on his face. He wore a padded jacket just like Pavel's. Pyotr turned him over. A thick beard and moustache, and a gaping wound under one eye.

The measured steps of a German policeman sounded somewhere in the distance. Crouching low, Prasolov hurried back to the house. In the entry, Grevtsova and Serdyuk were waiting. "Well?" both asked at once.

Pyotr told them what he had seen.

"And you were thinking of going to Maria," said Serdyuk, as they returned to their room.

Again Maria shrugged contemptuously, resuming her old seat in the corner. Prasolov settled down beside her. Pyotr loved his brother, but knew his weaknesses only too well. Gifted with lively imagination, Pavel was somewhat lacking in sense of proportion, and often needed a restraining hand.

Serdyuk lay down on the bed again, and closed his eyes. He hardly doubted, now, that Pavel was lost; and he was bitterly tormented by his own impotence.

"Is it self-control, or simply lack of human feeling?" Maria wondered. "How can he lie around that way, with a comrade's life in danger?"

She called softly:

"Andrei Vasilyevich!"

Serdyuk did not reply.

"Andrei Vasilyevich!" she called again.

He opened his eyes, and looked at her so that he lost all desire to question him.

For a long time there was no sound in the room. When footsteps sounded outside, all three would hold their breaths, anxiously listening; but the steps would always go by, dying away in the distance. No one turned in at the door.

"What's new in town?" Serdyuk asked finally, evidently unable to bear the silence any longer.

er. "What new orders from the Kommandantur?"

"Not many," replied Maria. "There's an order for all Communists to register; a municipal board has been set up; the Kommandant has appointed a burgomaster, and the burgomaster has appointed block and district agents. The Jews are ordered to organize a congregation. So far, that's all."

"It's quite enough," Serdyuk glumly returned.

Someone tapped, cautiously but persistently, at the window facing the yard. Pyotr immediately disappeared into the entry.

Pavel came in, wet and muddy, but radiant. Serdyuk sprang up to meet him, and, much to Maria's surprise, swept him into a joyful embrace.

"Well, how was it?"

"Beautiful! A regular fairy tale!" Pavel cried, breathless with enthusiasm. "The minute the car stopped, Smakovsky got out and made for the house on the run. Felt he'd be laid for, the dirty rat! Well, and the car didn't leave. Just my luck! He'd got to the door already, and the car was still there. So I just let go at him twice, and ripped the rest of the bullets at the car, straight at the car. And then I dived in at the gate and away through back yards. Only one thing—I don't know

how many I hit." Drawing himself suddenly up, he asked, in an entirely different tone: "What's the next assignment, Andrei Vasilyevich?"

"There won't be any more assignments," Serdyuk said drily.

"Lie low awhile?"

"No. There won't be any more assignments for you at all."

The three young people stared, wide-eyed. Serdyuk was clearly ill-pleased; but they dared not ask him what was wrong.

Unhurriedly, he drew a chair up to the table and sat down, motioning the others to follow his example. Only Pavel remained standing, afraid that his clothes might soil his chair and spot the tablecloth.

Serdyuk said:

"Repeat the orders you received."

Then Pavel understood.

"But how could I leave without firing a single shot?" he pleaded.

"Your orders were, to leave in case of obvious danger. Therefore, you were obliged to leave. Who gave you permission to shoot in full sight of the Germans? You're not free to dispose of your life as you choose. It belongs to our country, not to you. What made you so late? Was there a roundup?"

"Yes, they surrounded the whole block. Searched all the yards. But I got away."

"There you are. A pretty picture! You might have thrown away your life, to no purpose at all. Maria risked badly, too, coming here after curfew. Your brother refused to go home when he was told. And now there's four of us together. Just imagine a raid, right now. We'd all four be caught at one swoop. And since we haven't recruited any helpers yet, that would mean the end of our whole organization, with nothing at all accomplished. And another thing: what sort of fool ideas have you all got into your heads? Take Maria. 'If I'm killed,' she thinks, 'there will be one girl less, that's all.' Such heroism! Not begrudging her life, and all that. But she doesn't stop to think that one life is twenty per cent of our organization. What did you stay behind the lines for, I'd like to know: to die, or to fight?"

"To fight," Maria answered, very low.

"Very well, then. Let's fight. Only subtly—craftily—intelligently. Our job is, to kill Germans, but remain alive ourselves. To blaze, but not burn out. And if we do die, it must not be for trifles. So let's get this thing settled, for good and all: either we have discipline, iron discipline, or I drop all work with you. I'll find other helpers. You must take your choice."

Serdyuk left the table and sat down on the bed again, as though to show that he did not wish to hurry their decision.

Pavel had not yet cooled after the night's adventure. He had been so eager to share his joy with them! And here, instead of the expected praise, he was being reprimanded!

After a pause, Serdyuk continued:

"In the underground, discipline is more essential than anywhere else in life. On discipline depend not only your own life, but the lives of your comrades and the success of your undertakings. Yet, despising discipline, you three follow your own wills, and risk your lives in the silliest way. Do you think it was easy on me—on all of us—to sit here waiting for you, Pavel, especially after that business out there? Tell him about it, Pyotr."

And Serdyuk pointed in the direction of the street.

Pyotr told his brother about the man who had been shot that night, just outside the house. Pavel, listening, dropped his eyes.

"It's beginning to dawn on him," Serdyuk reflected. "Only—how long will it be before he forgets?"

"It won't happen again, Andrei Vasilyevich," Pavel said firmly, looking up at him. "I was wrong, of course."

And Pyotr, considering the matter settled, asked:

"What's the next assignment?"

"Nothing just yet," Serdyuk replied. "Later on, you'll have to find jobs—all of you. What sort of jobs, and where, we'll settle when the time comes; but it will be wherever the organization needs you: at the works, maybe, or in the police, or even in the Gestapo. That will be the most reliable camouflage. Maria's not a member of the Comsomol. We can send her safely into any German institution. You'll have to get used to the fact that there's nothing particularly romantic about the underground. It's hard work; humdrum, everyday work, requiring patience and self-control. And that means, clench your teeth till they crumble—but keep yourself in hand."

A silence fell. Maria Grevtsova sat very still, her chin on her hands. What Serdyuk had just said was altogether out of keeping with her conception of the fight behind the German lines. Patient waiting, humdrum work—her heart rebelled! As it was, she felt left out of things. Pyotr and Pavel had already received assignments, yet she was kept inactive.

At the other end of the table, Pyotr, sitting back in his chair as though resting quietly after

a day's work, watched his brother curiously out of the corner of an eye.

"Children, inexperienced youngsters," Serdyuk reflected, looking across the room at them with the tenderness of an elder brother. "They ought to be peacefully discussing Comsomol affairs, organizing youth teams at the works, perhaps. And instead...."

He got up and joined them at the table.

"You must understand, comrades of mine," he said, with an earnest warmth that took Maria by surprise. "You must understand. For me, what I'm doing now is the same work I've done before. At the border, I guarded our Motherland, our people, against the vermin that tried to sneak across the line. I destroyed those vermin. And now, too, I'll be destroying the vermin that have crossed our border, that are trying to defile our soil. With you, it's different. You never had any conception of this sort of work. Maria, say. She was planning to go to Moscow this fall, to study. She's very much interested in astronomy. Isn't that so?"

"Why, yes," murmured Grevtsova, wondering at his knowledge of her plans.

"And the work you're doing now is as far a cry from astronomy as heaven from earth. Or take Pyotr. He was going to be a Party functionary."

"You're wrong there," Pyotr put in. "It never entered my head."

"Well, it entered other heads. There was a decision to send you to a school for Comsomol activists, if you wanted to go. Pavel—he hadn't made any plans for the future yet. He liked his work, and did it well. All of you were living a peaceful life, living it and building it up. And now you must fight for that life. It's not an easy task, and it's not one in which you can afford to blunder. You won't be reproved for blunders at meetings now, or reprimanded by the management. You'll be hung. That's why we must have iron discipline."

They sat talking until morning. When day broke, Serdyuk went to the window and flung open the shutter. In the middle of the street, flat on his back, lay a man in a padded jacket. A pool of blood gleamed black on the pavement beside him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Smakovsky's career began auspiciously: initiated by his speech over the radio, and furthered not a little by the unsuccessful attempt on his life. He became at once a person of consequence, and the Germans appointed him man-

ager of the works. True, the position was a temporary one, pending the arrival of the new "proprietor," Baron von Wechter; but Smakovsky set zealously to work.

All electricians who had failed to evacuate were rounded up and brought to the power station, where they were kept under close guard. Most of the work, however, was done by a German military labour unit. For the beginning, only one of the four boilers was fired—just enough to provide light for the town and settlement.

After the power station, the Germans undertook the restoration of the machine shop, which they planned to use for the repair of tanks and trucks.

The day after his appointment, Smakovsky moved into a roomy, well-furnished apartment in a house that stood by the very gates of the works.

This was the most secure of residences, inasmuch as there was always a patrol on duty at the gates, and, living here, he had no need to show himself in the streets of the settlement.

The attempt on his life had seriously alarmed the new manager, and he was always careful to leave the works before dark. Even at home, however, he was constantly haunted by a sense of impending danger, particularly strong in the dark

hours of night. He locked up half the rooms in the apartment, barricaded the kitchen door—and continued to start nervously at every sound.

Irina, who had linked her fate with his, was gradually infected with a similar terror. Fear became this couple's customary state of being. Irina, moreover, learning that Krainev had remained in town, trembled at the thought of a possible encounter with him. She had never understood her husband; and she was altogether at a loss to comprehend his sudden shift to the German camp. How would he behave, she wondered, on meeting her or Smakovsky? Though, after all, what could he do? Were they not birds of a feather, now?

Vladislav Smakovsky—that was a different matter. She had always understood him perfectly.

Vladislav had spent his early childhood in ease and luxury, his father, Georgi Apollonovich Stokovsky, being a wealthy shareholder and member of the board of the Bryansk Locomotive Co. The year 1917, however, had turned everything upside down. The workers had carted papa Stokovsky out of the plant in a wheelbarrow, and tumbled him into a ditch full of dirty water. Anxious to avoid repetition of this rather chilly bath, Georgi Apollonovich had gathered up his family and his household goods and migrated to the "capital" of

the Don territory, where, he felt, there could be no revolution.

Then the Don, too, had become Soviet. On the heels of the retreating White army, the Stokovskys had removed to the Crimea; but their attempt to escape abroad had failed, the last ship leaving before they reached the coast. Thus, no choice had remained but to settle down under the Soviets. A family council, at this juncture, had thought it best that papa Stokovsky "accept" the Revolution and go to work—excellent tactics, as it had transpired, Stokovsky being one of the first of professional men to come over to the Soviet side.

After a life in which his only cares and obligations had consisted of attendance at infrequent board meetings and regular receipt of dividends, Georgi Apollonovich found work a very difficult thing to get accustomed to. In his free hours, at home, he grumbled and complained continually.

Vladislav was kept out of school, studying at home under his father's guidance; for the elder brother, Dmitri, on entering school, had rapidly begun to absorb "plebeian" manners and views, and the parents, horror-stricken, had resolved to preserve their younger son, at least, from such dread influences. Only at the age of eighteen did

he find himself in the classroom, entering school in the last grade.

Older and better provided for than most of his schoolmates, Vladislav held himself aloof, coldly disdainful of these boys and girls whose fathers were so much less distinguished than his. Stokovsky was at this time chief engineer of a big iron and steel works in Siberia.

Vladislav's arrogant manner, inherited from his father, could gain him no friends. His only companion was the little girl, Irina.

Irina's mother, widowed in early life, had come to live with the Stokovskys as a sort of housekeeper, or poor relative—she did not much care what she might be called, so long as her daughter received what she termed "a genteel bringing up." Evil tongues had it that the housekeeper's duties were considerably enlarged during Madame Stokovsky's frequent absences at health resorts. But what will not evil tongues find to say!

Vladislav was strongly attracted by Irina's pretty face, by her imperious air.

The atmosphere in the Stokovsky household was one of tearful reminiscence of the past and vague hopes for the future. The present was ignored.

At nineteen, Vladislav graduated from school and left for Tomsk, to study at the Institute of

Technology there. But he did not succeed in completing his studies.

Georgi Apollonovich, commissioned to Germany to purchase equipment for the Soviet iron and steel industry, remained abroad, breaking off all communication with his family. Six months later, Vladislav dropped out of the Institute and disappeared from Tomsk.

For some time he wandered about the country, trying various towns and various professions. And always it seemed to him that he was kept down to lesser positions than he deserved. He felt the urge to be in command, to order people about.

Eventually, deciding to renew his studies, he matriculated in an iron and steel institute in the Donbas. It was here that he re-encountered Irina. She was working as secretary in the office of the institute.

Vladislav had somewhat altered his family name and patronymic. Irina made no allusion to the change. They became intimate friends.

The time came for the presentation and public maintenance of diploma theses. Smakovsky was scheduled to present his thesis on the same day as one of the evening students—Sergei Petrovich Krainev. Irina came to hear them. She was acquainted with Krainev, and rather liked him. Vladislav

was embittered, guarded, often sombre; Krainev, cheerful, unassuming, friendly—far easier to get along with.

Smakovsky made a brilliant showing. Equipped with an excellent knowledge of German and English, he had written a voluminous, though purely compilatory thesis. His opponents were few, and he had no difficulty in refuting their remarks, plentifully seasoning his well-selected material with references to West-European authorities. His fine show of erudition impressed not only the audience, but the diploma board.

Then Krainev came forward, composed, laconic, to maintain his thesis—an original design for the ports of the open-hearth furnace. He cited no world-famed authorities. His idea was new, and entirely his own, matured in the course of several years of work at the furnaces.

The problem was a much-debated one, and Krainev's new solution encountered many opponents. In his replies to their remarks, he did not cite a single foreign source. Nothing could have emphasized more sharply the difference between Krainev and Smakovsky.

Presented with profound and sincere conviction, Krainev's precise calculations of thermal conditions, backed by references to personal experience and to the joint experience of his

fellow steelmen, convinced the diploma board of the utility of his proposal.

When he finished, it became clear to all that, unlike Smakovsky—a mere translator in the field of engineering—Krainev was an engineer destined to create.

Irina, too, recognized this difference. The future, she saw, was Krainev's. And she felt a new attraction towards this quiet, confident young man.

Krainev was invited to stay on at the institute for postgraduate study; but he refused, and took an engineering job in an iron and steel works. He loved the shop and the furnaces, the fascinating process of steelmaking.

Smakovsky was not interested in postgraduate study. Teaching was not the sort of work to flatter his vanity. He, too, took a position in a Donbas works, in pursuit of a "metallurgical" career.

This was the period when Soviet metallurgy had just begun its splendid upswing; when the whole country applauded the feats of blast-furnace men, steelmen, rolling mill men who were upsetting the old production norms and setting new high standards.

Yet Smakovsky's plans for a swift career did not materialize. He was not lacking in knowl-

edge; but he had never learned to work, and pride kept him from learning. He could not get along with his fellow engineers, could not merge with the works collective.

Growing lonely, he recalled Irina, and made an attempt to search her out. But she had married, it appeared, and left the institute together with her husband.

Then, shortly before the war, Krainev was transferred to the same works in which Smakovsky was employed. Smakovsky, at that time shift engineer in the open-hearth shop, promptly requested a transfer to the engineering department, on plea of ill health.

He and Irina met as old friends. They had much in common, and enjoyed each other's company.

Sergei Petrovich was very occupied, anxious to bring the shop to rights as quickly as possible, to ensure plan fulfilment. When the war began, he was completely absorbed by his work. Smakovsky, on the other hand, was entirely free after working hours. Not even the necessity for mastering output of the new armour steel could keep him or Valsky at their desks in the engineering department a moment longer than usual. Dubenko cursed them for whistle worshippers, day labourers, idle loafers; but they continued im-

perturbably to leave the works as soon as their official hours were over. Valsky would go home, Smakovsky—to the Krainevs'.

Irina was always glad to see him, for she had no other friends. She did not get along with Elena Makarova, who was always busy with her boy and her studies, and, when the war began, with her volunteer work in the army hospital. Besides, Elena was a general favourite, and that Irina could not forgive. No one must excel her in any way.

Smakovsky was an agreeable companion, if only for the fact that he approved everything Irina said or did. This, in her eyes, was a major virtue.

Marriage, by this time, had proved a great disappointment to Irina. Conceiving of love as one long honeymoon, she could not reconcile herself to what she called "the prose of life."

And now she felt that with Smakovsky she could be happier. She believed in him implicitly, and he found no difficulty in persuading her that the Soviet Union would be defeated in the war—a conclusion, moreover, which seemed to her completely justified by events at the front.

And then Smakovsky set the alternative: evacuation—which, he said, was sure in the final account to end in capture by the Germans; or a

new life, here, with him. She chose the latter. She had no fear of the Germans. When they came, she was confident, Vladislav would achieve his career. He had every necessary quality.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Germans were infuriated by the attempt on Smakovsky, during which one of the soldiers accompanying him was wounded. Evidently, there was an underground organization in the town, swift to strike and fearless of reprisals. Searches and arrests began throughout the town.

For some days, Krainev was forgotten. He stayed at home, living on canned goods and vanilla rusks, which Irina had stored up in incredible quantities, and eating his heart out over his enforced inactivity and the uncertainty of his position.

The ammonite walled up in the cable channel haunted his dreams and his waking thoughts. There were moments when he felt he had been wrong not to speak over the radio. Had he spoken, his prime task, the destruction of the power station, would have become easier of achievement. His failure to speak must, of course, have set the Germans against him, thus imperilling all his